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KIETH
MESSNER-LOEBS
THE MAXX
maxximized

THE MAXX MAXXIMIZED

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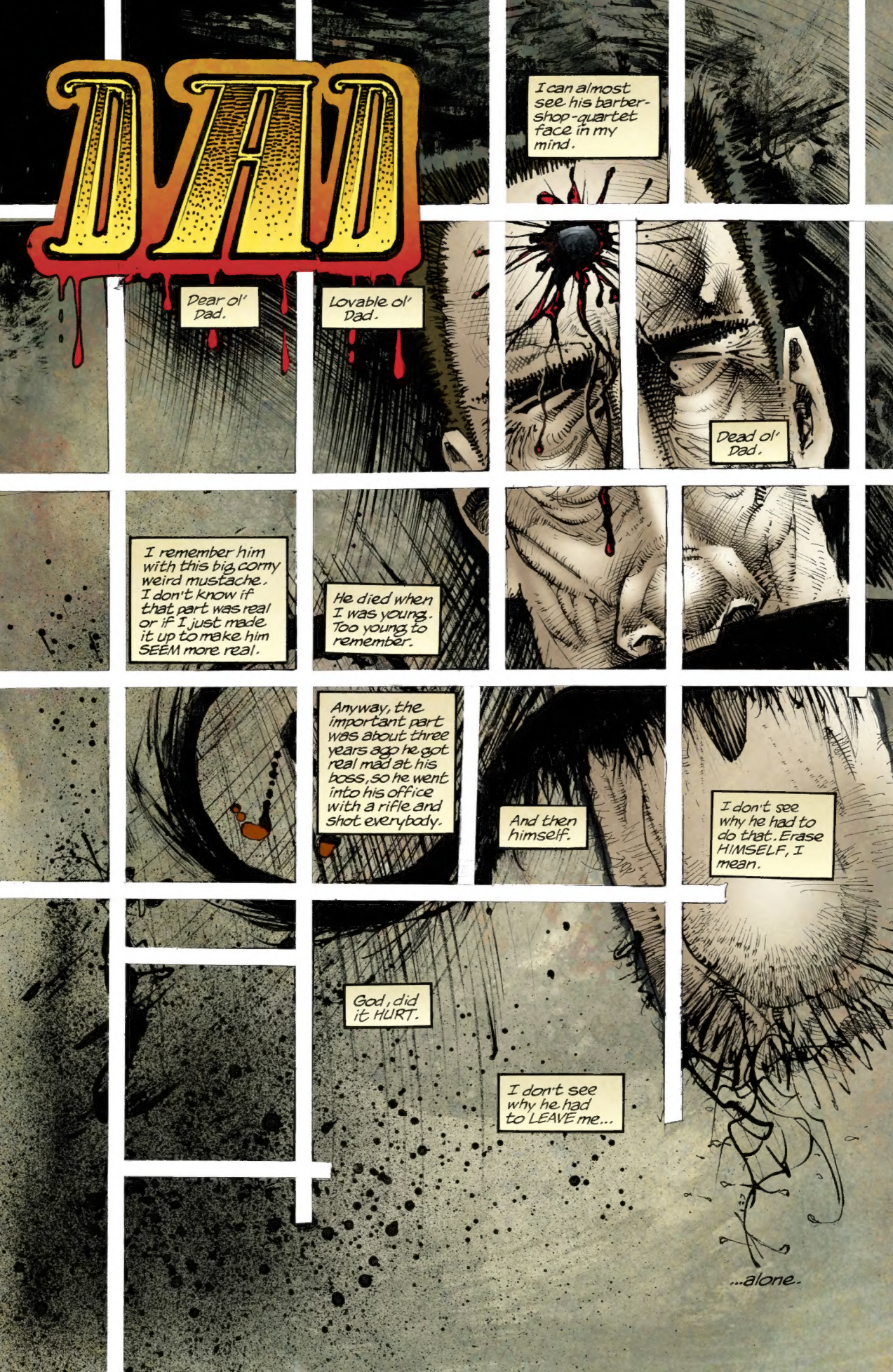
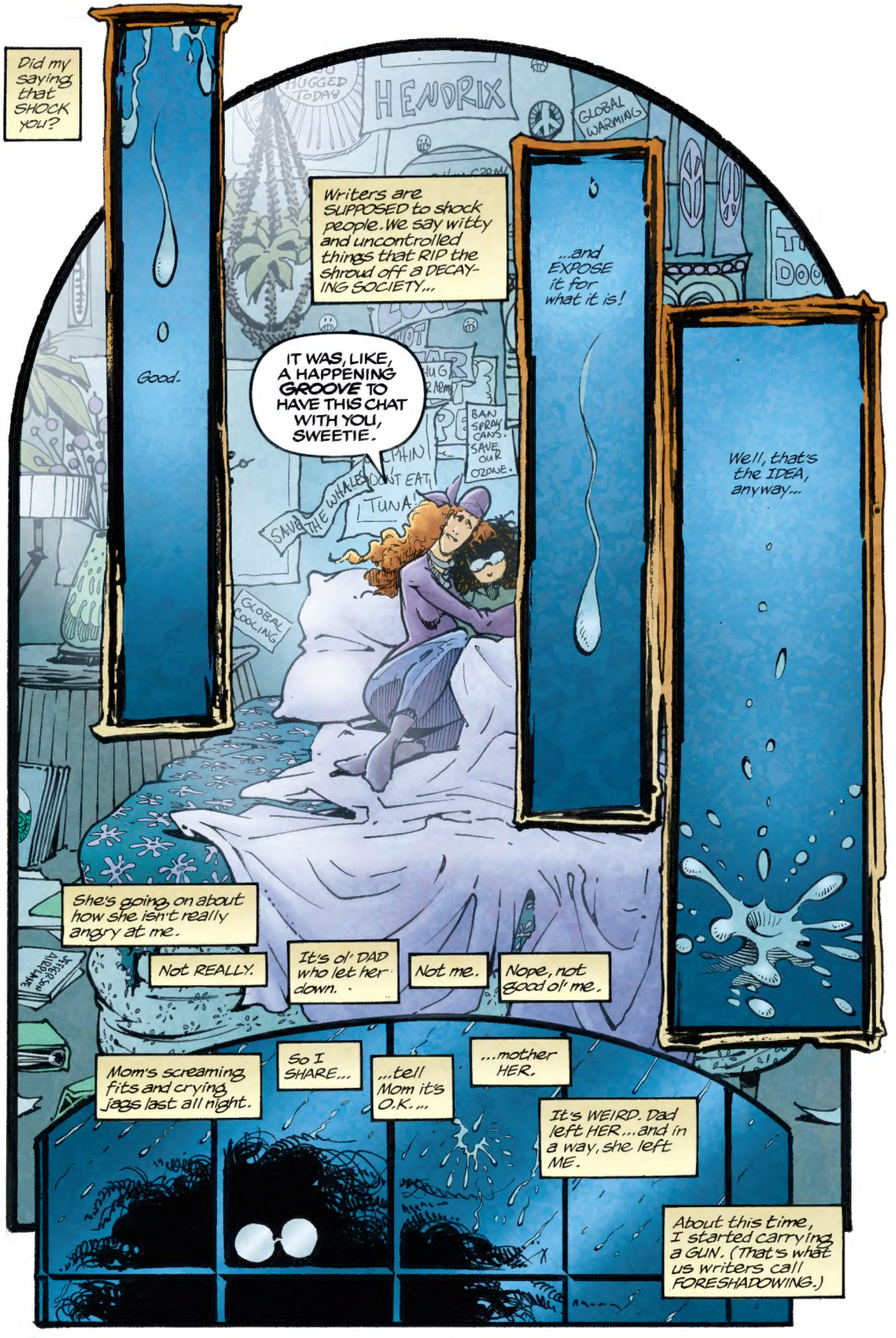
I was sitting under the Jones Street underpass yesterday.
That's 'cause I want to be a writer...
...an' writers gotta have EXPERIENCE. Like underpasses.
There was an old BUM there, too.
"Hi." I said. "My name's Sarah."
At first, he didn't say anything.
MAXX
Then he made a funny noise in his throat. He said his name was...
It turned out he was a superhero, fighting this villain called MR. GONE.
But he was also this jungle guy fighting SABER-TOOTHED TIGERS and stuff in AUSTRALIA.
I didn't have to make any of that stuff up (even though I AM gonna be a writer). He just came right out an' told me, all the fight scenes an' everything. I 'specially liked the little COW BATHROOM.
You say this guy was SERIOUSLY NUTS? Well, !☆DUH!☆
An' then, right out of the blue, he says he knew my father.


DAD
Dear ol' Dad.
Lovable ol' Dad.
I can almost see his barber-shop-quartet face in my mind.
Dead ol' Dad.
I remember him with this big, corny weird mustache. I don't know if that part was real or if I just made it up to make him SEEM more real.
He died when I was young. Too young to remember.
Anyway, the important part was about three years ago he got real mad at his boss, so he went into his office with a rifle and shot everybody.
And then himself.
I don't see why he had to do that. Erase HIMSELF, I mean.
God, did it HURT.
I don't see why he had to LEAVE me...
...alone.

Speaking of STUPID things...
MOM
PEACE, SUNSHINE.
DID YOU HAVE A GROKKIN' KARMA KIND OF DAY...? DID YOU CATCH ANY BAD VIBES TODAY?
I mean, like wasn't the SIXTIES a long time ago?
SO, HOW'S SCHOOL? TRIPPY?
S'OKAY.
I don't see WHY she has to BE like this. She wasn't like this BEFORE Dad offed himself.
IT'S NOT LIKE YOU WERE A DISAPPOINTMENT TO US OR ANYTHING, IT'S JUST THAT YOU PULL BACK. JUST LIKE HE USED TO DO. I'LL NEVER FORGIVE HIM FOR THAT.
GROOVY! NOW WE CAN BE LIKE SISTERS! WHO'S GOING TO TAKE YOU TO THE PROM?
TELL ME I'M NOT A BAD MOTHER! TELL ME I DIDN'T RUIN YOUR LIFE!
-:sighh: YOU DIDN'T RUIN MY LIFE, MOM.
OH, GOD!
If Dad had to SHOOT somebody, why couldn't it have been HER?
YOU BETTER SHARE WITH ME, SARAH. I WON'T HAVE YOU ENDING UP LIKE YOUR FATHER!
I DIDN'T MEAN THAT! WHY DID I SAY THAT?


Did my saying that SHOCK you?
Good.
Writers are SUPPOSED to shock people. We say witty and uncontrolled things that RIP the shroud off a DECAYING SOCIETY...
...and EXPOSE it for what it is!
IT WAS, LIKE, A HAPPENING GROOVE TO HAVE THIS CHAT WITH YOU, SWEETIE.
Well, that's the IDEA, anyway...
HENDRIX
GLOBAL WARMING
GLOBAL COOLING
BAN SPRAY CANS. SAVE OUR OZONE.
SAVE THE WHALES
She's going on about how she isn't really angry at me.
Not REALLY.
It's ol' DAD who let her down.
Not me.
Nope, not good ol' me.
Mom's screaming fits and crying jags last all night.
So I SHARE...
...tell Mom it's O.K....
...mother HER.
It's WEIRD. Dad left HER...and in a way, she left ME.
About this time, I started carrying a GUN. (That's what us writers call FORESHADOWING.)

But first I have to tell you about...
JIMMY
Jimmy is cool.
He beats up littler kids and takes their lunch money. I think that's kind of cool. No matter how low you are in the FOOD CHAIN, there's always somebody LOWER.
I think WE'RE all either ONE of us can get.
Besides, we HATE everybody else. They're all NECRO-NERDS. SAND-FREAKS.
Jimmy is short like me. He doesn't have friends -- like me.
They have tattoos and stuff saying how ROMANTIC death is. But Jimmy knows the TRUTH -- like me.
Death is hard an' cold an' UGLY.
Not some cute chick!
This is a story Jimmy told me.
I'm putting it down just like he said it, 'cause reproducing HUMAN SPEECH is a talent every writer should have.
ME AND FREEM WAS SKRAGGING THIS CAR ON EIGHTH. WE FIGURED WE'D CRUISE AROUND IN IT FOR THE NIGHT AN' THEN DITCH IT.
IT WAS MY JOB T' BOINK THE STARTER...
"...BUT I FORGOT 'BOUT MY SCREW-DRIVER WHEN I GOT IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT.
RRIPP!

"FINALLY, WE PULLED OUT...

SSSCREECHHH

"AN' THEN THIS OLD RATTLETRAP CUT US OFF!

SMASH!

OH, NO!

"CARJACKERS!

"THE GOLDARN SCUZZBALLS WANTED T'STEAL OUR STOLEN CAR!

"WELL, THAT P.O.'ED US PLENTY! WE BEGAN TO FIGHT BACK!

"THEN FREEM, THAT WUSS, BAILED ON ME!

"I WAS ALONE.

"AN' THAT DADBLAMED SPRING WOULDN'T LET GO!

"I WAS DEAD.

TAP TAP TAP

"DEAD.

"...

SLAM!

"I STARTED TO REALLY FIGHT THEN.

THUMP

"I BIT OFF ONE GUY'S THUMB.

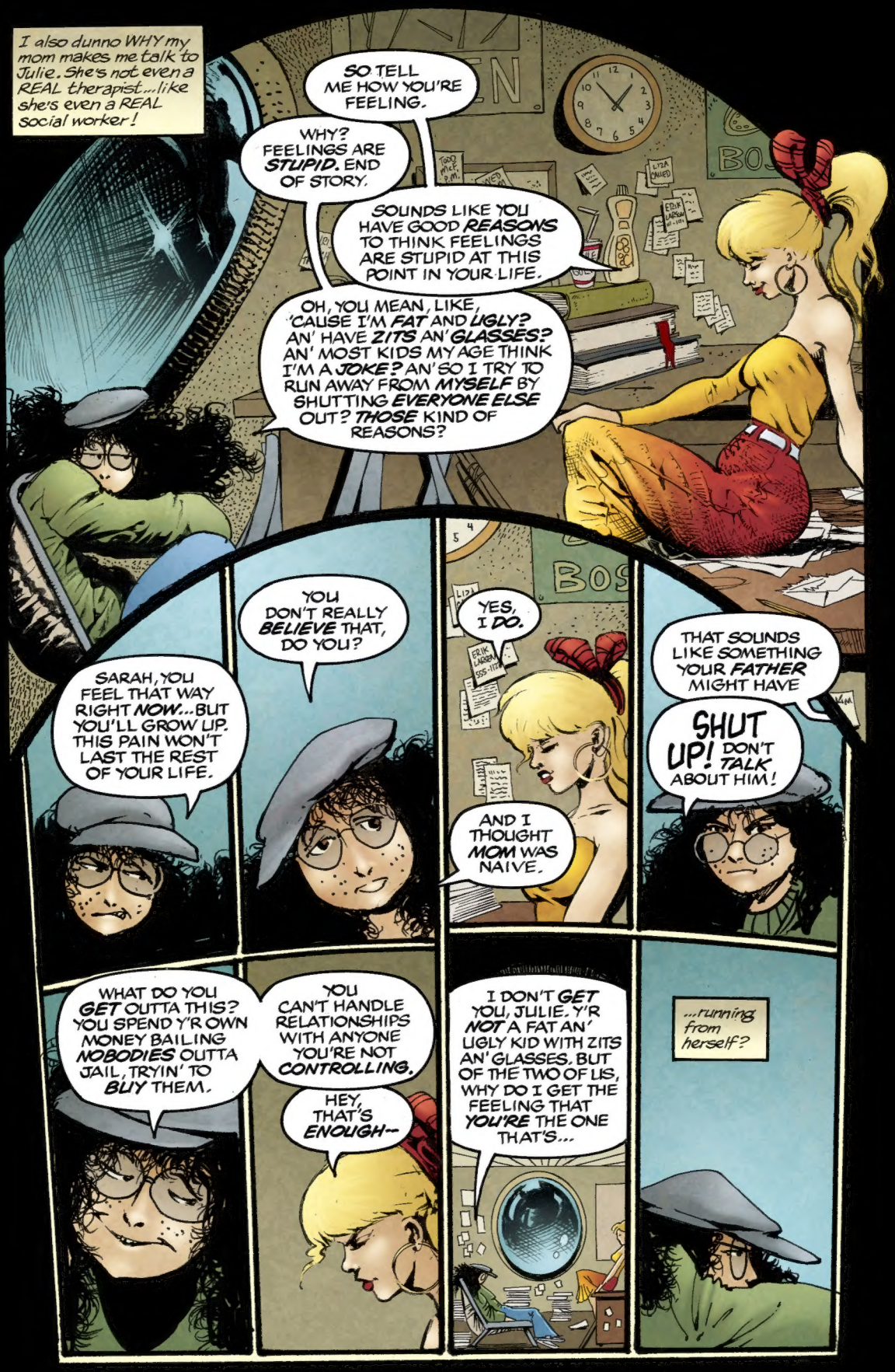
"ANOTHER GUY, I CRACKED HIS RIB LIKE A PENCIL.

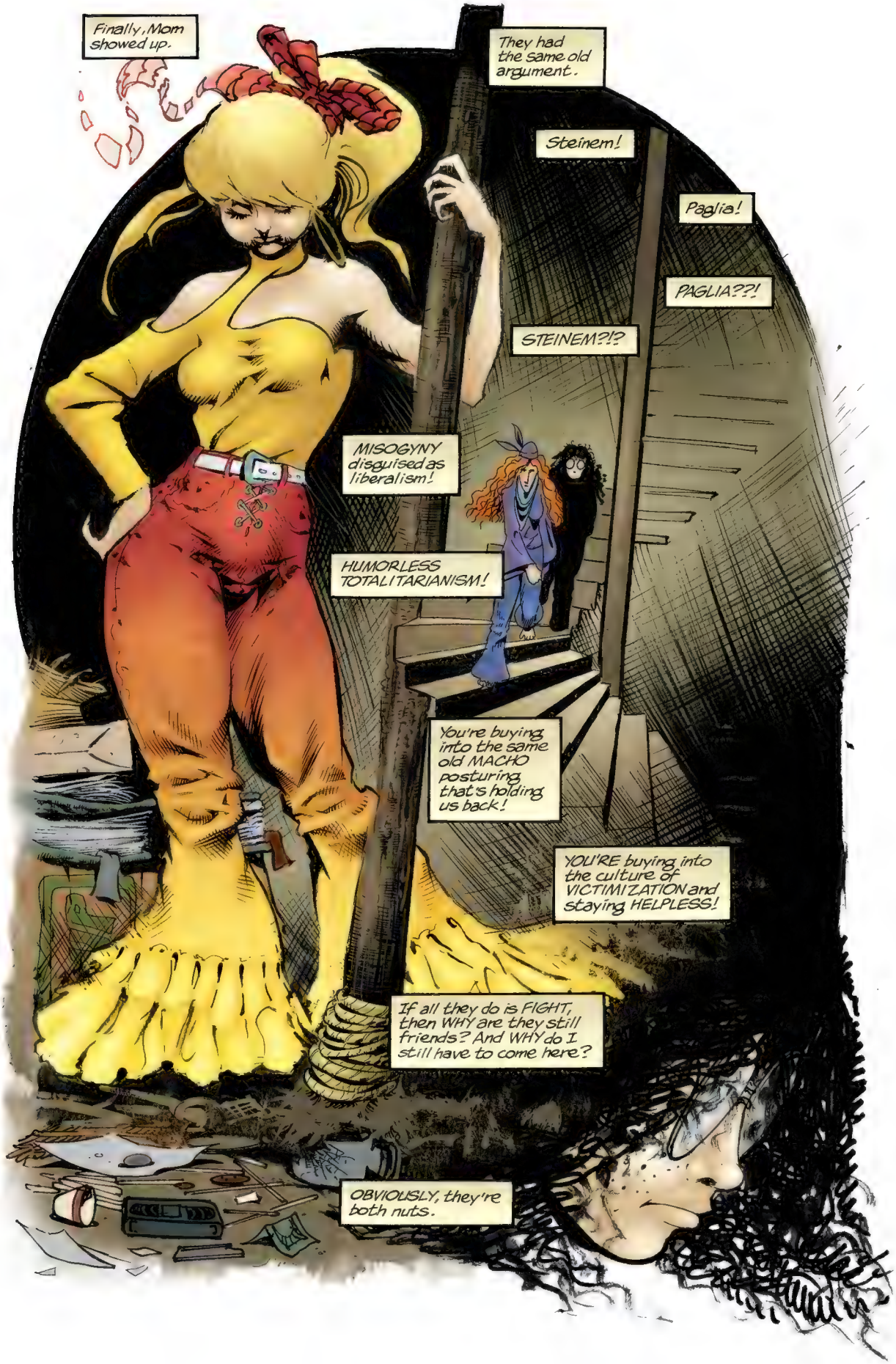
"THEY WERE CRYIN', SCREAMIN' FOR MERCY.

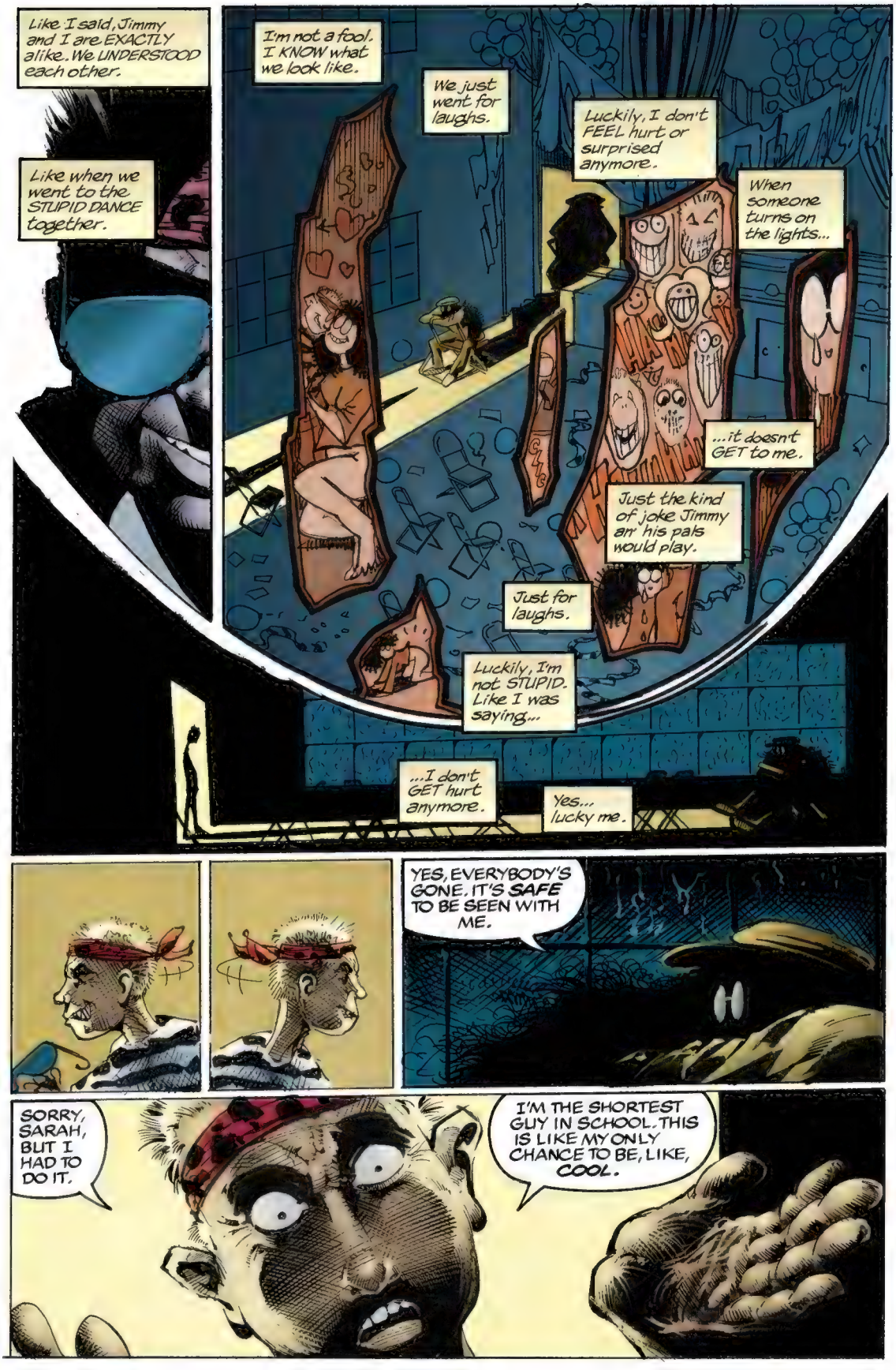
"I ONLY LAUGHED.

"THEY NEVER HADDA CHANCE!"

Wasn't that a cool story?
Now, this is the chapter about...
MISS JULIE
She's an old friend of my mother's. I think they went to school together or something. She does this SOCIAL WORKER thing out of her apartment. Very weird.
...I SAID I'D HAVE THE MONEY, MR. BRUNO. I JUST NEED A LITTLE MORE TIME PUTTING IT TOGETHER. YOU DON'T HAVE TO EVICT THEM TODAY, DO YOU?
UHHN...
OH, YOU DO, YES, I'M SURE THAT RAT-INFESTED HOVEL IS BEING EAGERLY SOLICITED BY OTHER DESPERATE SINGLE MOTHERS, BUT DO YOU THINK YOU COULD BEAT BACK THE HORDES FOR ONE DAY, WHILE...?
Ah...?
YES, I DO REALIZE THAT YOU ARE LORD KING GOD OF THE UNIVERSE IN YOUR BUILDING, BUT PERHAPS IF I COULD SEE MY WAY TO SWEETEN THE RENT WITH ANOTHER FIFTY...? YOU WILL? YOU'RE A PRINCE AS ALWAYS, MR. BRUNO.
THOSE FUNKY 70
HI, SARAH. YOUR MOM TELLS ME YOU'RE STILL HAVING... TROUBLE.
QUEEN
NO TROUBLE. I'M FINE. HE'S GONE.
SHE SAYS YOU BROOD A LOT. YOU SEEM TO LIVE IN THE PAST.
THIS FROM THE LIVING FOSSIL. LIKE SHE KNOWS WHAT'S R'LLY GOING ON...
SHE KNOWS SHE LOVES YOU, SARAH.
I FOUND ONE OF MY DAD'S GUNS LAST WEEK.
IT MADE ME FEEL GLAD TO TOUCH IT. LIKE I WAS NEAR HIM.
I didn't tell her I've been CARRYING it in my coat pocket. I dunno WHY.


I also dunno WHY my mom makes me talk to Julie. She's not even a REAL therapist...like she's even a REAL social worker!
SO TELL ME HOW YOU'RE FEELING.
WHY? FEELINGS ARE STUPID. END OF STORY.
SOUNDS LIKE YOU HAVE GOOD REASONS TO THINK FEELINGS ARE STUPID AT THIS POINT IN YOUR LIFE.
OH, YOU MEAN, LIKE, 'CAUSE I'M FAT AND UGLY? AN' HAVE ZITS AN' GLASSES? AN' MOST KIDS MY AGE THINK I'M A JOKE? AN' SO I TRY TO RUN AWAY FROM MYSELF BY SHUTTING EVERYONE ELSE OUT? THOSE KIND OF REASONS?
SARAH, YOU FEEL THAT WAY RIGHT NOW...BUT YOU'LL GROW UP. THIS PAIN WON'T LAST THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.
YOU DON'T REALLY BELIEVE THAT, DO YOU?
YES, I DO.
AND I THOUGHT MOM WAS NAIVE.
THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING YOUR FATHER MIGHT HAVE
SHUT UP! DON'T TALK ABOUT HIM!
WHAT DO YOU GET OUTTA THIS? YOU SPEND Y'R OWN MONEY BAILING NOBODIES OUTTA JAIL, TRYIN' TO BUY THEM.
YOU CAN'T HANDLE RELATIONSHIPS WITH ANYONE YOU'RE NOT CONTROLLING.
HEY, THAT'S ENOUGH--
I DON'T GET YOU, JULIE. Y'R NOT A FAT AN' UGLY KID WITH ZITS AN' GLASSES. BUT OF THE TWO OF US, WHY DO I GET THE FEELING THAT YOU'RE THE ONE THAT'S...
...running from herself?


Finally, Mom showed up.
They had the same old argument.
Steinem!
Paglia!
PAGLIA??!
STEINEM?!?
MISOGYNY disguised as liberalism!
HUMORLESS TOTALITARIANISM!
You're buying into the same old MACHO posturing that's holding us back!
YOU'RE buying into the culture of VICTIMIZATION and staying HELPLESS!
If all they do is FIGHT, then WHY are they still friends? And WHY do I still have to come here?
OBVIOUSLY, they're both nuts.


Like I said, Jimmy and I are EXACTLY alike. We UNDERSTOOD each other.
Like when we went to the STUPID DANCE together.
I'm not a fool. I KNOW what we look like.
We just went for laughs.
Luckily, I don't FEEL hurt or surprised anymore.
When someone turns on the lights...
...it doesn't GET to me.
Just the kind of joke Jimmy an' his pals would play.
Just for laughs.
Luckily, I'm not STUPID. Like I was saying...
...I don't GET hurt anymore.
Yes... lucky me.
YES, EVERYBODY'S GONE. IT'S SAFE TO BE SEEN WITH ME.
SORRY, SARAH, BUT I HAD TO DO IT.
I'M THE SHORTEST GUY IN SCHOOL. THIS IS LIKE MY ONLY CHANCE TO BE, LIKE, COOL.

SEE, WE WERE TOGETHER 'CAUSE NOBODY ELSE LIKED US. BUT NOW EVERYBODY WILL LIKE ME.

I KNOW IT'S STUPID TO GIVE UP YOU FOR EVERY-BODY ELSE...

...BUT I JUST CAN'T HELP IT.

BESIDES, WE WERE JUST HAVIN' A LAUGH ...RIGHT?

NOBODY REALLY GOT HURT... RIGHT?

I could feel the gun in my pocket. But even more I could feel the SWEET, HOT HATRED my dad must've felt.

YOU UNDERSTAND, DON'T YOU, SARAH?

I UNDERSTAND.

YOU AREN'T MAD, RIGHT? 'CAUSE WE C'N STILL BE FRIENDS AN' STUFF, AS LONG AS NOBODY SEES US.

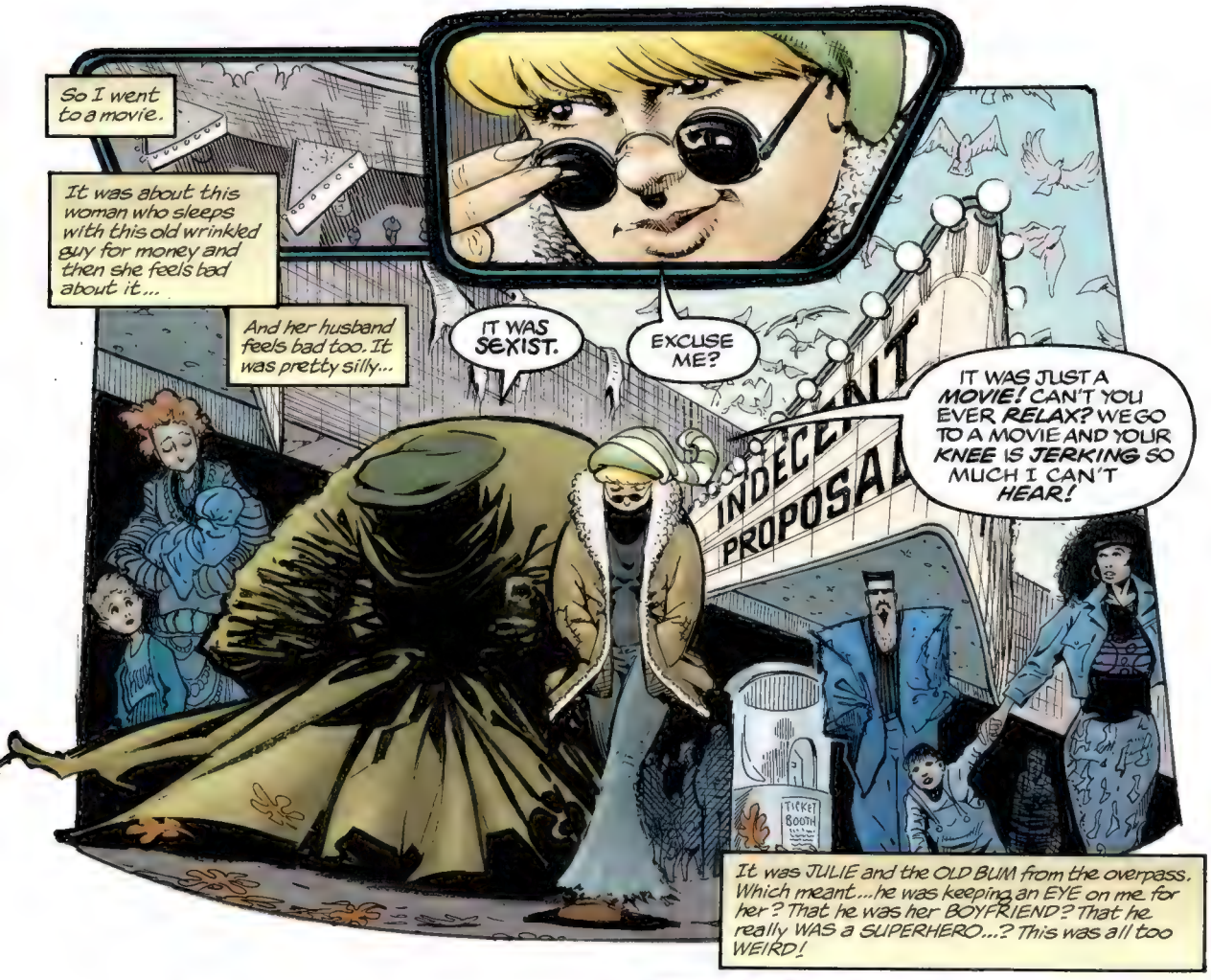
I'M NOT MAD, JIMMY.

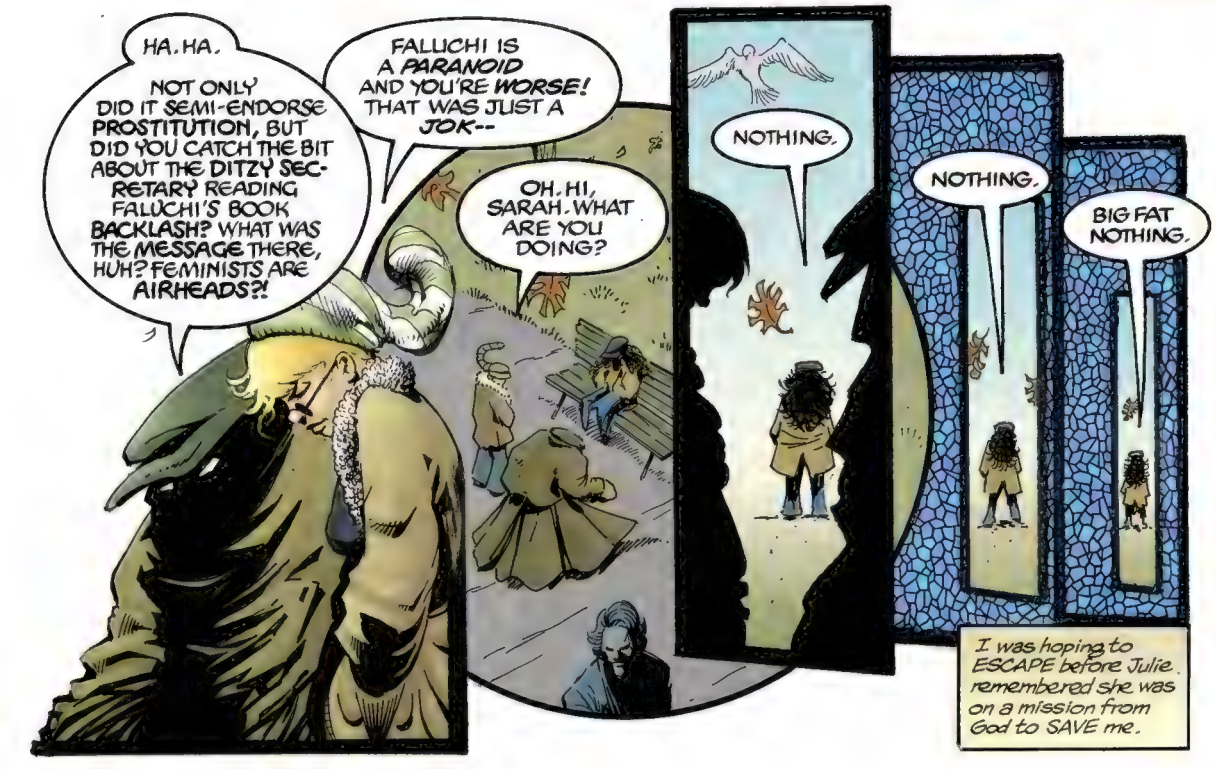
And the funny thing was...

...that wasn't a lie.

I wasn't mad. Because in that second I realized that if they had come to ME rather than him, I would've done the same thing.

I think it's an important thing for a writer to know... that she has the potential to be as ROTTEN as everybody else.


So I went to a movie.
It was about this woman who sleeps with this old wrinkled guy for money and then she feels bad about it...
And her husband feels bad too. It was pretty silly...
IT WAS SEXIST.
EXCUSE ME?
IT WAS JUST A MOVIE! CAN'T YOU EVER RELAX? WE GO TO A MOVIE AND YOUR KNEE IS JERKING SO MUCH I CAN'T HEAR!
INDECENT PROPOSAL
TICKET BOOTH
It was JULIE and the OLD BUM from the overpass. Which meant...he was keeping an EYE on me for her? That he was her BOYFRIEND? That he really WAS a SUPERHERO...? This was all too WEIRD!

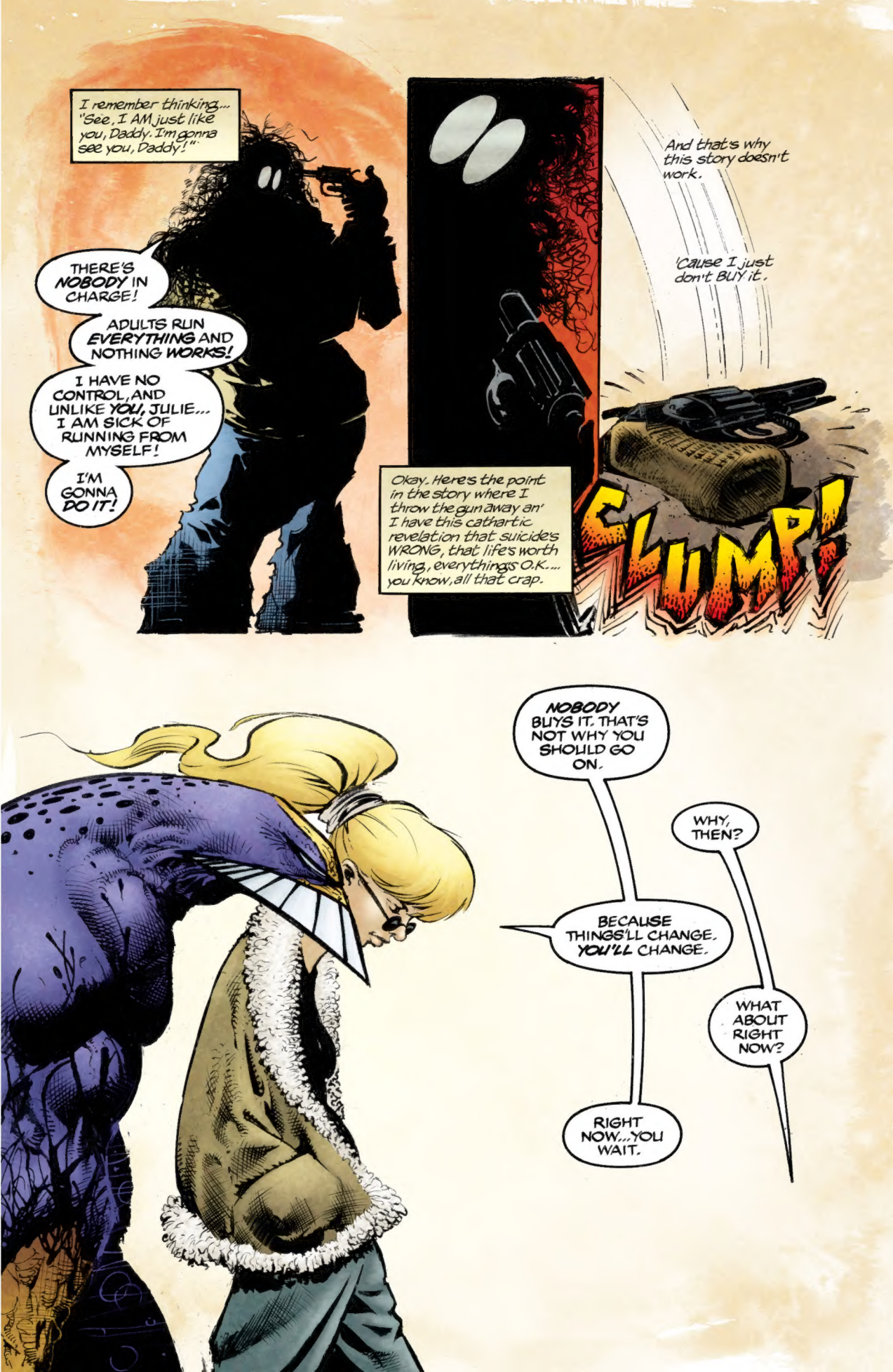

HA. HA.
NOT ONLY DID IT SEMI-ENDORSE PROSTITUTION, BUT DID YOU CATCH THE BIT ABOUT THE DITZY SECRETARY READING FALUCHI'S BOOK BACKLASH? WHAT WAS THE MESSAGE THERE, HUH? FEMINISTS ARE AIRHEADS?!
FALUCHI IS A PARANOID AND YOU'RE WORSE! THAT WAS JUST A JOK--
OH. HI, SARAH. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?
NOTHING.
NOTHING.
BIG FAT NOTHING.
I was hoping to ESCAPE before Julie remembered she was on a mission from God to SAVE me.

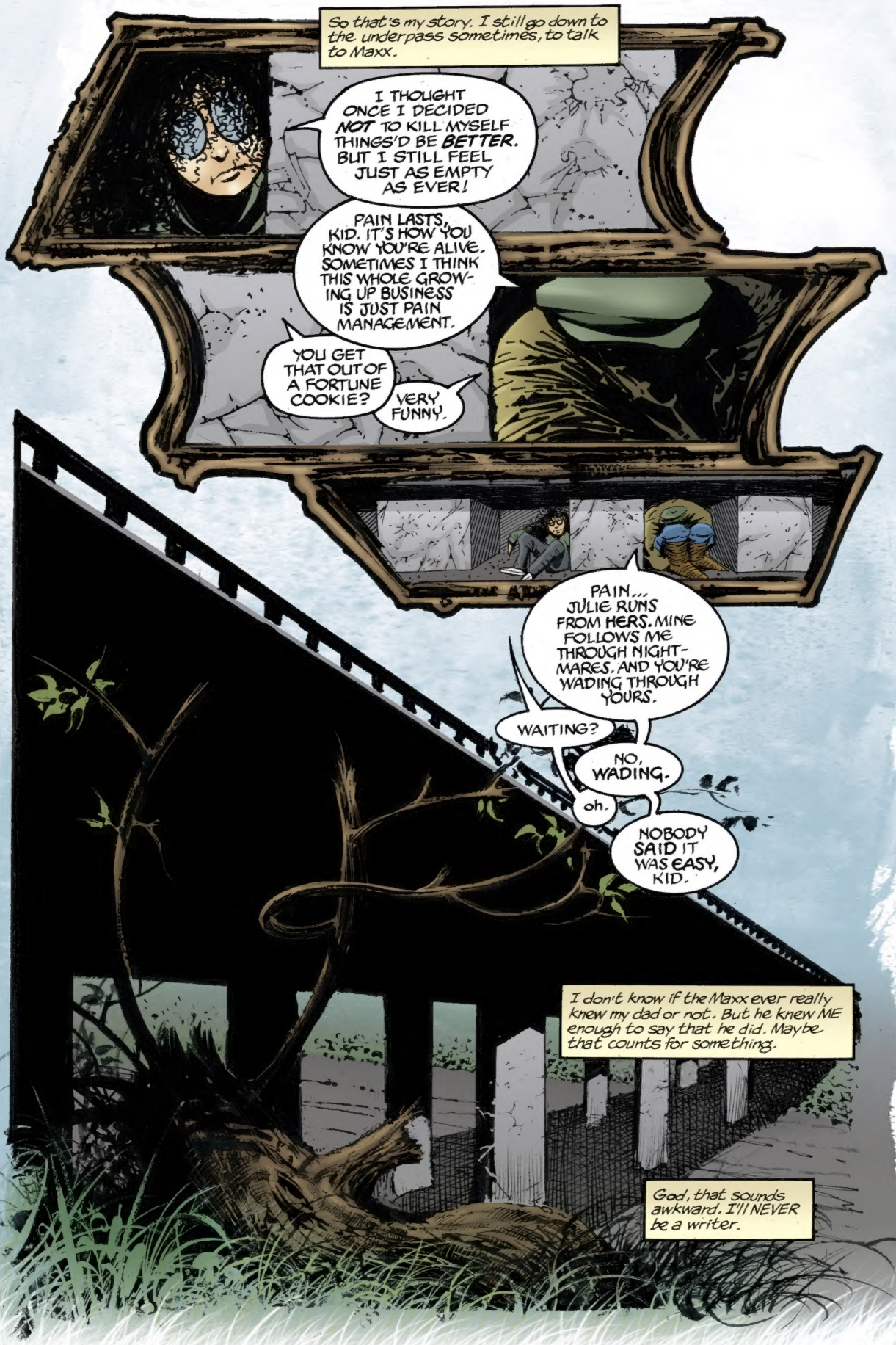
Too late.
HONK! HONK!
SAY, KID... YOU WANT TO GO TO THE AQUARIUM? THEY GOT SQUID.
SURE!
It would drive my mom NUTS if I ran off for hours with Julie and her HOBO boyfriend.
Which is WHY I did it, I guess.
OKAY, KEEDS. NEXT STOP--
CRUNCH
It was the CARJACKERS!
In SPOTTED UNDERWEAR!
Huh?
FREEZE... MEEP! ...SUCKER!
JULIE... WAIT.

...SOMETHING'S WRONG.
Uh-oh. I knew that look in his eyes. He was SEEING THINGS again.
Maybe he'd do something stupid...
Like grab their guns...
Maybe he thought those guys were little blue men or something...
Or pull them into the car...
CRUNCH!
WHUP!
Or something...

This was a lot different than the STORY Jimmy told me about fighting the CARJACKERS. That was COOL.
THIS was UGLY...
...people getting HANDS CRUSHED right before my eyes!
EEEP!
Ripped open from KNEES to STERNUM!
Their heads POPPED like GRAPEFRUITS!
It made me feel SICK, even if...
...it did make a sort of EXCITING climax to the story.

One of them even bounced off a wall like a rubber ball, like a CARTOON character and came screaming through the air, grinning like a shark, straight at MAXX!
SPUNK!
But he missed.
And when he died, he didn't even look HUMAN at all.
STOP!
SARAH...? PUT THE GUN DOWN, SARAH.
NO! NOTHING MAKES ANY SENSE!
AND IF IT MAKES ANY SENSE, THEN IT'S ALL GOTTA STOP!
CLICK!
I think it was then that I, SARAH JAMES, lost it.


I remember thinking... "See, I AM just like you, Daddy. I'm gonna see you, Daddy!"
THERE'S NOBODY IN CHARGE!
ADULTS RUN EVERYTHING AND NOTHING WORKS!
I HAVE NO CONTROL, AND UNLIKE YOU, JULIE... I AM SICK OF RUNNING FROM MYSELF!
I'M GONNA DO IT!
Okay. Here's the point in the story where I throw the gun away an' I have this cathartic revelation that suicide's WRONG, that life's worth living, everything's O.K.... you know, all that crap.
And that's why this story doesn't work.
'Cause I just don't BUY it.
SLUMP!
NOBODY BUYS IT. THAT'S NOT WHY YOU SHOULD GO ON.
WHY, THEN?
BECAUSE THINGS'LL CHANGE. YOU'LL CHANGE.
WHAT ABOUT RIGHT NOW?
RIGHT NOW... YOU WAIT.


So that's my story. I still go down to the underpass sometimes, to talk to Maxx.
I THOUGHT ONCE I DECIDED NOT TO KILL MYSELF THINGS'D BE BETTER. BUT I STILL FEEL JUST AS EMPTY AS EVER!
PAIN LASTS, KID. IT'S HOW YOU KNOW YOU'RE ALIVE. SOMETIMES I THINK THIS WHOLE GROWING UP BUSINESS IS JUST PAIN MANAGEMENT.
YOU GET THAT OUT OF A FORTUNE COOKIE?
VERY FUNNY.
PAIN... JULIE RUNS FROM HERS. MINE FOLLOWS ME THROUGH NIGHTMARES. AND YOU'RE WADING THROUGH YOURS.
WAITING?
NO, WADING.
oh.
NOBODY SAID IT WAS EASY, KID.
I don't know if the Maxx ever really knew my dad or not. But he knew ME enough to say that he did. Maybe that counts for something.
God, that sounds awkward. I'll NEVER be a writer.